





9-28-48

LS SML 12604

FDSPL

30-



GUIDE TO PRIVATE SOCIAL WORSHIP.

THE

D U T Y

OF

STATED AND SELECT

PRIVATE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP,

BRIEFLY

INCULCATED AND DIRECTED.

Let the words of Christ dwell richly in you, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs. Col. iii. 16.

FIRST AMERICAN, FROM THE SECOND GLASGOW EDITION.

Pittsburgh:

PUBLISHED BY LUKE LOOMIS.

1837.

ADVERTISEMENT.

"**THEN** they that feared the Lord spake often one to another and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name." Malachi, 3:16.

The Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church at their last sessions, recommended the republication of the following excellent little work, and desired any member of the church, who might think proper, to undertake the same, on his own responsibility. The subscriber, in accordance with the above desire, has undertaken this little service for the church of Christ, with the hope that her members will put themselves in possession of this valuable treasure, and with the earnest desire, that it may be blessed by the Head of the church, not only for the comfort and edification of that portion of the church, under whose recommendation it now comes forth in this edition; but also for the benefit of all other friends of Zion; and especially for the instruction and comfort of those who "fear the Lord, and desire to speak often one to another," in surrounding the social altar. The publisher only adds that all the proceeds arising from the sale of this work, after defraying the cost of publication, has already been devoted to the funds of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

PHILIP MOWRY,

Pittsburgh, Nov. 28, 1836.

PREFACE.

The religious associations, familiar to many by the name of Fellowship Meetings, form the subject of the following pages. This branch of Christian fellowship has been exemplified, in all ages, in the practice of saints, and has the testimony of experience to its utility and pleasure. Ministers, whose praises are in the churches, have warmly recommended these Societies, as eminently subservient to the interests of practical religion, and have employed their pens in furnishing regulations for conducting them. Associations of this kind have long been held in high estimation, and are still, more or less, in use, among christians of various names. They promote personal piety and practical godliness, and they are means and evidences of the prosperity of religion in the Church.

The following Publication is prepared by appointment of the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, to be a kind of Manual, or Directory, to the people under their charge, in conducting fellowship societies. For this purpose, a Short Directory for Religious Societies was published in 1782; but this work is now out of print, and, having been written at a time when there was an infrequent enjoyment of the public ordinances of religion, it referred particularly to this circumstance. A petition was lately presented to the Synod, requesting that a Directory for Private Social Worship might be prepared, for the use of societies. The Synod readily complied with this wish, and the following pages were submitted, in terms of Synodical appointment, to the review of a Committee, who heard them read, made some observations upon them, and appointed them to be printed and circulated. They are now, accordingly, submitted to the particular attention of the members of the Church, and are commended to the Divine blessing,

The subject of Private Christian Fellowship is treated here on general principles, and is not viewed nor claimed, as any peculiarity of the people to whom this publication is immediately addressed. These pages are designed, in the first instance, of course, to direct and encourage, in organizing and maintaining fellowship societies, among the people at whose request they have been prepared: but, with the exception of some historical allusions in the concluding address, there is nothing exclusively peculiar in this publication. If Providence, therefore, shall carry it beyond its primary destination, it will rejoice those who have authorised the publication, if it shall be the means, in any degree, of bringing into view, a species of religious institutions, which has been found highly beneficial, both to the individual christian, and to the Church of God. As personal religion is the first requisite for the prosperity of the Church, and as it is the only permanently efficient principle of zeal and active exertion for the welfare of Zion, institutions expressly bearing on this vital object, appear to be of no inferior importance.

February, 1823.

CONTENTS.

Introduction	- - - - -	7
I. The Obligations	- - - - -	9
II. The Advantages	- - - - -	18
III. Rules	- - - - -	28
IV. General Directions and Cautions	- - - - -	37
Conclusion	- - - - -	52

GUIDE &c.

INTRODUCTION.

‘WHOSOEVER believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and every one that loveth Him that begat, loveth also Him that is begotten of Him.’ The change which is effected in the human soul, by its conversion to God, extends to the social principle. The renewed heart is secretly attracted toward God, and toward those who have his likeness. It is, therefore, the duty of the Christian to cherish in his heart the love of the saints, and to seek their society. The communion of saints is, indeed, eminently subservient to fellowship with God. ‘That which we have seen and heard, declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.’

The communion of saints is a subject of delightful interest to the Christian mind; and it admits most extensive illustration. The child of God, united by the Spirit and by faith to Him who is the Head, has a certain, though invisible, fellowship with all the members of the same body, in heaven and on earth. In meditation and in prayer, he enjoys a precious communion in his spirit, with the saints and excellent that are on the earth, and known to him, even when there is no opportunity of personal intercourse. The public ordinances of religious worship afford val-

uable means of holy fellowship. Here the saints of God see the faces of one another, and enkindle mutual holy affections, as they unite in prayer, and in praise, and in hearing the words of eternal life. This communion becomes still more intimate and endearing, when the disciples sit together at the table of their Lord, and have fellowship with one another in receiving, dividing among themselves, and participating bread and wine, in commemoration of his love. Besides, the saints have communion in immediate converse with one another. They 'take sweet counsel together when they walk unto the house of God in company.' Occasionally they meet, in the necessary intercourse of secular affairs, and may communicate with one another, as those who are 'not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.' At the table of hospitality, and in the circle of friendship, they may take counsel together as strangers on the earth, and as friends of Him that sticketh closer than a brother. And at the bed of sickness they may meet, and mingle their sympathies and consolations, in presence of Him who is touched with the feeling of all their infirmities, and who is the 'consolation of Israel.' The communion of saints, in such cases, when blessed of God, has, in it much to profit and to please; and the opportunities of enjoying it, often, yield sensible delight, and are remembered with exquisite satisfaction.

To give full scope unto the 'communion of saints,' and to realize the advantages and pleasures to be derived from it, it is necessary, when

there is an opportunity, that Christian brethren voluntarily and regularly associate in small select societies, for private and social worship, and familiar communication on the things of God. Such associations are not only warranted, on the general principle of Christian liberty, but they appear to be required in the word of God.

To this, not the least interesting branch of the fellowship of saints, we now direct our attention, and shall consider in the first place, its obligations and advantages, and then give rules for its practical observance, with some general directions and cautions.

I

THE OBLIGATIONS.

The obligation of private Christian fellowship is dictated by *reason*, and confirmed by *the universal practice of mankind, in every department of pursuit*. Reason or the light of nature, is, under the direction of the infallible Rule, a proper source of argument in the matter of obligation. 'Doth not even nature itself teach you?' 'It is not good that the man should be alone,' was originally inscribed on the human mind, by its Almighty Former. And under the operation of this law, man discovers an early and powerful desire of society. This original principle of his nature is not suppressed, but sanctified and directed in 'the renewing of the mind.' Men of kindred dispositions, and of similar pursuits, seek the society of one another, and derive advantage and enjoyment from mutual counsel and stated association. The

regular and stated associations of persons devoting themselves to favorite pursuits, have contributed extensively to individual improvement, and to public good. What improvements have, in this way, been made in agriculture, in manufactures, and in commerce, and in literature and science? The principle which renders these associations so beneficial, may be applied, with equal propriety, and with superior effect, to the interests of practical religion and devotion. There is nothing in the nature of religion to proscribe this general principle, but every thing to establish it. 'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour.' 'Iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.' Shall Christians feel less interest, and shew themselves to be less in earnest, in pursuing the things which are not seen, and which are eternal, than in following the things which are seen, and which are temporal? Shall the children of this world be always wiser in their generation than the children of light?

This obligation is implied in the *character and relations of the saints*. They are represented, in the scriptures, not only in individual, but in social and relative characters. They are 'brethren,' children of the same Father, and members of one household; and shall they not associate in terms of familiarity and love? They are 'members of the same body, and every one members one of another;' and they cannot sympathize and co-operate in a state of separation. They are 'fellow-servants of one Master.' Their work is one, their difficulties are similar, and their reward

is the same; and in this service, there is no prejudicial jarring of interests and of honours. It becomes them, then, to counsel and assist one another, in the service of the same Lord. The saints are 'fellow-citizens:' shall they not communicate with one another on their individual circumstances, and on Jerusalem's good? They are 'fellow-soldiers' under the Captain of salvation. Their banner is one. Their enemies are common. Their warfare is the same. And they should animate one another in the battles of the Lord, and in following up the victory. They are 'joint-heirs' of one inheritance, which they shall in due time realize, without prejudice to one another; and it becomes them, as partakers of 'one calling,' to confirm one another in their 'one hope.' These and similar views of the saints express their common duties which they are called to perform, and the one aim and prospect which they have before them; and they imply, as subservient to these purposes, the propriety of establishing select associations for spiritual fellowship.

Private Christian fellowship is obviously necessary *for the discharge of the duties which Christians owe to one another.* They live not to themselves, but to the Lord, and to one another. Many are the duties which their great Lord has commanded them to perform to ONE ANOTHER. The frequency of such precepts, and the nature of the duties they inculcate, merit our particular notice. Christians are commanded to 'love one another'—to 'receive one another'—to be 'kindly affectioned one to another'—to 'consid-

er one another'—to 'teach and admonish one another'—to be 'subject one to another'—to 'care one for another'—to 'bare one another's burdens'—to 'confess their faults one to another'—to 'forbear and forgive one another'—to 'comfort one another'—'in honor to prefer one another'—to 'provoke one another to love and good works'—to 'pray for one another'—and 'as every man has received the gift, even so to minister the same to one another.'* Christians are expressly enjoined to *exhort one another*, and to *teach and admonish* one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. It is manifest, from the nature of many of these duties, that they cannot be performed in the fellowship of public ordinances, and that they must be in danger of being omitted altogether, if left to the casual intercourse of Christians. Occasional select meetings are necessary for the performance of some of them, at least, such as mutual exhortation, confessing of faults, and admonition. And stated associations are necessary, in ordinary circumstances, to give full scope to the performance of these holy Christian duties, both in their spirit and in their letter.

Private Christian fellowship has the sanction of *holy example*. The principle is beautifully exemplified in the words of David, 'I am companion of them that fear thee.' He speaks of his 'equal, and guide, and familiar friend,' and of 'taking sweet counsel together, and going unto the

* John xiii. 35. Rom. xv. 7. xii. 10. Heb. x. 24. Col. iii. 16. 1 Pet. v. 5. 1. Cor. xii. 25. Col. iii. 13. 1 Thess. iv. 8. Rom. xii. 10. Heb. x. 24. James v. 16. 1 Pet. iv. 10. Heb. iii. 13.

house of God in company;' referring, in the present deep regrets of the mind, to private religious friendship. In another passage he says, 'Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.' But we have examples more directly in point. Consider the case of the captive Hebrews. They retired by the rivers of Babylon, and, suspending their harps upon the willows, their hearts and their eyes poured out tears to God, when they remembered Zion. We read of Daniel and his companions, on a certain occasion, uniting in desiring mercies of the God of heaven,* and is it not probable that by this mean, as well as others, they were enabled, on future occasions, and in difficult circumstances, to maintain an honorable singularity and steadfastness? We also read of the fearers of the Lord in the days of Malachi, that they 'spake often one to another;' which is in the very letter of the spirit of the constitution, of which we now speak. We have the example of Jesus and his disciples. Their association, although extraordinary in respect of the presence of Christ, and in respect of the immediate grand design to be accomplished, affords an example of the religious intercourse, under consideration. And it appears that this intercourse was continued among the disciples, for we find the eleven gathered together and others with them, on the evening of the first Christian sabbath. 'And after eight days again the disciples were gathered together, and Thomas with them.'† And we read in the beginning of the

* Dan. ii. 17, 18. † Luke xxiv. 33. John xx. 26.

Acts of the Apostles: 'These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.*' Now, in these cases, the thing described resembles rather private Christian fellowship, than the public celebration of Divine worship. We have direct allusion to the very thing of which we are speaking, in Acts xii. 12, where it is said that Peter, on his miraculous liberation from prison, 'came to the house of Mary, where many were gathered together praying.' And it is said, Acts xvi. 13, 'And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made, and we sat down, and spake unto the women who resorted thither.' There is also some reason to apprehend, when we read of the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, in the house of Philemon,† that there is a reference, in the first instance, to a few Christians statedly meeting together, in one place, for spiritual conversation and devotional exercises. The examples of private Christian fellowship are thus numerous.

It may be objected to the particular conclusion aimed at by producing these cases, that it is not sufficiently warranted; some of the cases being extraordinary, and predicated on peculiar circumstances, while others of them cannot be ascertained to be precisely of the same nature with these religious associations which they are adduced to sanction. This may be true, and the strength of the argument unimpaired. The cases men-

* Acts. i. 14. † Rom. xvi. 5. Col. iv. 15. Philem. 2.

tioned furnish examples of a species of Christian association, different from ordinary family worship, and different from public assembling for Divine worship. They establish the general principle of the competency of Christians to meet for private religious worship. The fact of these associations being resorted to in peculiar circumstances, does not necessarily imply that they were never in use, in more ordinary circumstances. Extraordinary circumstances may call for a special discharge of this duty, and of other duties, while at the same time these duties are of ordinary and permanent obligation.

The religious exercises of which we are speaking, *have the high sanction of Divine approbation and encouragement.* Can any thing impress a character of greater importance on an exercise, than what is said of the fearers of the Lord speaking often one to another, in the days of Malachi? 'And the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels, and I will spare them as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.*' The Lord bows an ear, and he gives a gracious audience to those who are thus employed; he enters their names, and the free-will offerings of their hearts and their mouths, on an imperishable record; and he imparts to them a very precious promise of honourable distinction and safety, and special mercy, at a future and a solemn day. These ex-

* Mal. iii. 16, 17.

ercises have not, in these latter days, lost their moral and excellent nature; nor have the gracious promises of God been withdrawn. These promises stand, and they have been renewed by the blessed Redeemer. 'Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth, as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'* Shall the united prayers of two or three be especially answered? Shall Jesus' gracious presence be in the midst of those two or three? and shall not his disciples gather and pray together? The promise of Christ condescends to small associations—to the least possible—to two persons. It is a beautiful incident in the Gospel narrative, bearing somewhat on these promises: 'And, behold, two of them went the same day to a village called Emmaus, and it came to pass that while they communed together, and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them.'† If Jesus be in the midst of two or three, gathered in his name, shall we not on His account, as well as on their account, and on our own, join ourselves unto them? Ought not Christians, as they have opportunity, to be in the way of realizing the fulfilment of so gracious promises? These promises surely impart a sanction, and a blessed encouragement, to private Christian fellowship.

It is not insisted that this duty has the same positive prescription with that of the Christian Sabbath, or Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Being a duty founded in the very law of nature, it is not

* Mat. xviii. 19, 20.

† Luke xxiv. 13, 15.

specially prescribed, like institutions properly positive. But the obligation can be established by the same kind of arguments with which the obligation of secret prayer, family worship, and other duties, is confirmed. It may be said, that the above arguments can only prove the occasional obligation of private social religious exercises, and it will be admitted that these exercises should be resorted to, particularly, on certain occasions. But it is obvious, from the nature of things that if many of the duties which Christians owe to one another are left to their occasional intercourse, they must either be unseasonably delayed and so lose much of their effect; or they must be neglected altogether, as the case too often mournfully stands. When Providence gives the opportunity of such associations; when the members of the Church voluntarily agree to associate; and when such associations have been exemplified by the saints, and are in general practice, the obligation appears to be of no very doubtful character. It is greatly to be desired that the Christian act in this matter from a willing mind. All duties are to be performed voluntarily; but some duties participate more of a voluntary character than others, from the circumstance, that the time and degree in which they are to be performed, have not the same specification, in the word of God, as in other cases. Of this kind are the duties of private religious fellowship, and their voluntary nature does not invalidate their obligation, nor render the omission of them blameless.

II.

THE ADVANTAGES.

By private Christian fellowship *the gifts of the members of the Church are united, for mutual good.* As in the extraordinary, so in the ordinary state of the Church, we observe diversities of gifts. This diversity must have a wise design on the part of Him who orders it. One Christian has knowledge. Another has reasoning. One has memory, and another has utterance. While all have much in common, every one has his proper gift of God, one after this manner and another after that. Unto every one is given grace, according to the measure of the gift of Christ. These gifts are imparted, not for individual good alone, but for the use of the body. The eye is not an eye unto itself, but to make the whole body full of light. The hands minister not unto themselves, but unto the body. One part cannot say unto another, 'I have no need of thee.' How pleasant is it to behold brethren dwelling together in unity; and to see the diversified gifts, in the body of Christ, animated by one spirit, and ministering to the general good! The lacking of one is supplied by the abundance of another, and useful gifts, comparatively lost in the individual, edify others. The Divine precept, on this subject, claims our attention: 'As every man has received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the *manifold* grace of God.*' Private religious fellowship affords

*1 Pet. v. 10.

an opportunity of a profitable and pleasing reciprocity of spiritual gifts. The very gifts themselves are improved by being exercised, and they serve in this way the end for which they were imparted. The fact of the diversity of spiritual gifts, declares the necessity of opportunities for their exercise, and seems to indicate design in the Author of them, that the saints should familiarly communicate with one another, in giving and receiving, as every man has received the gift. The select associations of which we speak afford agreeable opportunities of thus *edifying one another*; and experience has often attested their utility and comfort.

By private Christian fellowship *religious knowledge is preserved, increased, and diffused*. By the social reading of the Scriptures, and conversation on their contents, Christians teach, every one his neighbour, and every one his brother. The acquisitions of religious knowledge lose their impression and use, and gradually diminish, if the mind do not exercise its powers, in renewed contemplation. The associations of which we speak lay the mind under a pleasing necessity of this spiritual exercise. Not only do Christians, in this way, put themselves and one another in remembrance of the things they have already known, but they 'grow in knowledge.' The young inquirer learns from the matured views of those more advanced in years; and even the aged may be put in remembrance, and derive a salutary stimulus from the lively ardour which the young mind discovers, as the field of know-

ledge opens before it. And knowledge is in this way diffused. 'The lips of the wise disperse knowledge,' and 'the ear of the wise seeketh knowledge.' Reading, meditation, and Christian conversation, and the hearing of the Gospel, are all 'profitable for instruction.' But the societies of which we speak have special advantages. They are regular, and they are familiar. There is opportunity of submitting particular inquiries; difficulties are removed; mistakes are corrected. In this way the young are nourished up in the words of faith, and of good doctrine; and, at the same time, persons eminently attained in religious knowledge, may occasionally derive instruction from the mouths of others, who, in comparison of themselves are 'babes and sucklings.' The saints are in this way instructors of one another.

Private religious associations *cherish a spirit of piety and devotion*. They have a devotional character, and are calculated to deepen the impression of the sentiments of religion in the heart. In these societies, religious knowledge is presented in a higher and more important view, than that of abstract argumentative speculation. It is presented, and circulates among the brethren, as something affecting the heart, and as having an influence in prayer and in praise. The social prayers and praises of the saints are calculated, by a blessed pervading sympathy, to give excitement to true religious feeling. 'Iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.' Neighboring flames brighten each oth-

er's blaze, and even dying embers, by being brought together, rekindle one another. In the solemn reading of the word of God in company, the attention will sometimes be more fixed; in social adorations, confessions, supplications, and thanksgivings, the heart will sometimes be more deeply impressed; and the song of praise will be more highly accentuated, when the saints 'exalt the name of God together.' These exercises are, therefore, under the Divine blessing, eminently auxiliary to the formation and cherishment of a devotional spirit; and they are calculated to counteract the secularizing effect produced by unavoidable intercourse with the world.

These associations *afford opportunities of mutual faithful admonition*, and thus stand connected with *the safety of the Christian*. In the present scene we are compassed with various and powerful temptations. The spread of evil principle, the fascinating influence of evil example, the prevailing maxims of mankind, and the insinuating practices of the world, are so many snares, spread thick in every direction around us. The heart is deceitful. At different stages of life, and in peculiar circumstances, temptation is strong. The Christian is in constant peril, and stands in need of the faithful admonition of his brethren. 'Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But EXHORT ONE ANOTHER daily, while it is called to-day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.' Association with the saints is calculated to impress

the mind with a holy awe, and with a sense of additional obligation. Seasonable admonition may serve to turn away from the scenes and occasions of temptation. In other cases, the remembrance of the saints, and of their admonitions, may serve to break the power of temptation. Even when temptation has prevailed, 'two are better than one, for the one will lift up his fellow; but wo to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to lift him up.' The faithful reproof is an excellent oil which shall not break the head. The penitent heart is disburdened in confessing its fault, and the Christian brethren receive one another in the spirit of meekness. The frequent miscarriages of Christians in the discharge of these duties are to be lamented; but they do not affect the excellency of the duties themselves, nor supersede the use of the means of performing them. The faithful counsel, the prudent and meek reproof of Christian brethren, are of unspeakable value. The associations of which we speak give opportunity and facilities for these important Christian duties, and every one becomes his 'brother's keeper.'

The duties of private Christian fellowship *yield comfort in times of trial*. Many are the afflictions of the righteous. Soothing is the influence of Christian sympathy. By means of select religious associations, Christians are better known to one another, and are drawn more closely together. They are thus better prepared to go with advantage, and with ease, to the bed of sickness, or to the chamber of bereavement, to

speak a word in season to sooth the sufferer, or to comfort the mourner. Is not the knowledge of being specially and affectionately remembered in the united prayers of brethren, a ground of comfort to the soul that languishes under weakness, or smarts under pain; while it is at the same time placing its dependence on the sympathies and intercessions within the veil? The saints return, sometimes, after affliction, to these associations, with particular comfort, and are helped in praising their deliverer. Christian sympathy is then brought into more lively operation, and brethren learn, in the society of one another, to put on as the elect of God, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering. They are taught to love and comfort one another, in all their afflictions. And at the death-bed they meet as friends, with an increased confidence; they weep and pray with an enlivened affection; and they part as friends, yet again, in a 'little while,' to meet to part no more. 'So shall we be ever with the Lord. Wherefore, COMFORT ONE ANOTHER with these words.'

Private Christian fellowship *has a happy influence upon the other duties and ordinances of religion.* The meditations of the closet, and the exercises of the family, will furnish matter for private conference and prayer. Again, the conversations and devotions of religious society will reflect an influence upon personal and domestic religious duties. The difficulty felt in the cogitations of the mind in retirement, may be resolved in the social conference; and the new communi-

cation obtained in society, may impart something fresh and enlivening to the closet, and to the family. The various duties of religion are connected with one another. Each has its peculiar character and advantage, and has an influence upon the others. The same thing may be said of the influence of private Christian fellowship in preparing for the public ordinances of religion, and in the improvement of them. Christian conversation stimulates the desire of knowledge, prayer disposes the mind for receiving it, and the recollection of the word of God, and the social bringing of it into remembrance, with prayer for the Divine blessing, may contribute not a little to establish its influence on the heart. The ministers of religion are helped by the prayers of the saints, and they earnestly solicit them. 'Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.' 'The effectual fervent prayer of the righteous availeth much.' 'And if two shall agree touching any thing which they shall ask, it shall be given.' Prayer is connected as a means, with the word of the Lord having free course; and may not the prayers of the saints be thus instrumental in bringing a Divine influence on the minister, in preparing for the sanctuary, and in speaking the words of eternal life; and on the hearer in receiving the word of truth? and may not the united recollections and supplications of the saints be means of watering the seed, and of making it spring up to everlasting life? The hearts of the

disciples appear to have burned within them anew, and their special enjoyments seem to have been recalled, when they said one to another: 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the Scriptures?'

These associations are calculated also *to unite the church, and to diffuse a public and liberal spirit among her members.* Christians have thus an opportunity of taking counsel together on the public interests of the Church of God, and of diffusing intelligence on the great cause of religion in the world. They instruct and confirm one another in the principles of Divine truth, and animate one another with holy zeal. Instructive and impressive dispensations of holy Providence, and intelligence of particular or general interest, are communicated. By these means, brethren excite a common interest in the concerns of Zion; in the evil day they comfort one another in recollection of the Divine promises; and they exhilarate the hearts of one another, while they contemplate the prospects which open upon the Church. They weep when they remember Zion, and they rejoice while they record the great things God has done for her, and the glorious things which are spoken of the city of the Lord. Unity of mind, of affection, of prayer, and of endeavour, is thus promoted; and these societies afford more regular and effective means of diffusing correct knowledge, and cherishing a public zeal, than a desultory communication with the religious public.

This species of religious association has also *advantages peculiar to itself*. In the casual intercourse of Christians, there cannot be the intimacy, regularity, and freedom, which stated private fellowship admits. In the family association, though truly pleasant, there must be a character of sameness, which is not in the other. In private Christian fellowship there is a variety, and there is an opportunity of inquiry, and of improvement, which cannot be enjoyed where one individual always maintains superiority. The public ordinances of religion are truly delightful, and the communion of saints is not the least sweet ingredient in the pleasure which they yield. Yet the public institutions have a more immediate bearing upon individuals and families, and do not afford that familiarity of intercourse which the other yields. Even 'the communion of the body and blood of Christ,' and the communion of saints in it, have more the character of a secret fellowship of spirit, than that of the associations, in which kindred spirits speak, and pray, and praise together. Even in the case of two Christians loving one another as their own souls, in which there is something most intimate and endearing, there cannot be that variety which is enjoyed in select society. Often these associations have laid the foundation of special religious intimacy, by bringing individuals together, and placing their kindred spirits within the sphere of mutual attraction. And when death separates chief friends, such associations furnish comforters to soothe the wounded spirit, and to step, in

some measure, into the breach. The different kinds of religious fellowship have all much in common with one another, and are all calculated to promote the best interests of the soul, and to advance its fellowship with God; yet none of them is perfect without the others, and each of them has advantages peculiar to itself. The practical conclusion to be derived from a comparative view of the different means of religious fellowship is, that Christians, as they have opportunity, should seek them all, that in their co-operation, under the Divine blessing, true religion may prosper in their souls, and that they may thus be gradually prepared for the perfect fellowship of heaven. One class of means does not supersede another. Their number and variety show the great importance of the end to be pursued, and the necessity of making every thing to bear upon it, which has the approbation and encouragement of God.

After stating the obligation of private Christian fellowship, and the advantages to be derived from it, our next question is: How shall these obligations be discharged and these advantages attained? Is it necessary that the associations of Christians for mutual fellowship be modelled into some form, and subjected to regulations, to give them order, regularity, and effect. In submitting regulations, we do not profess to offer express positive sanction from the word of God. Reason and experience, under the direction of the principles of the word of God, must suggest regulations; and a digest of rules must be formed, under

the avowed principle that 'there are some circumstances, concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.'

III.

RULES.

I. That the important duties of private Christian fellowship may be regularly and successfully performed, it is necessary to *organize stated select societies* for social worship. And it is the duty of the members of the Church, having access to these societies, and not prevented by some insuperable impediment, to connect themselves with them; each member attaching himself particularly to one society.

II. The *members* of these societies must be in the full fellowship of the Church, that with unity of sentiment, and with unrestrained familiarity and brotherly confidence, they may take council together on Divine things. And full members of the church, without distinction, have access to these societies.

III. Persons of decent Christian character, waiting regularly upon the dispensations of religious ordinances, and expressing a wish to corres-

pond with the members of the Church, and to obtain further information in the profession of the gospel, may be permitted to *sit in society*, without being called to engage in its active duties. In matters of this kind much Christian prudence is required, and wisdom is profitable to direct.—The *children of members*, in their minority, should be introduced into society with their parents; and they should occasionally be objects of special attention in the society, for their early encouragement in the ways of the Lord.

IV. It is competent to two members to form themselves into a society, the gracious presence of Christ being promised to two or three. It is desirable that the *number of members* amount to eight or twelve. In general when the number reaches to twenty members, or goes above it, it may be proper, by mutual agreement, to divide into two societies.

V. *Time and place* must be regulated for the convenience of members. Where members are not far separated, they should meet weekly, and thus speak often one to another. In other cases, the meetings of society should be held, if practicable, not less seldom than every alternate week.

VI. The *ordinary exercises* of these meetings shall be, praise, reading the scriptures, prayer, and conversation on Divine things.

VII. The members meet in terms of proper equality, and are to be called, in *regular rotation*, to officiate in conducting the devotional exercises. The society should be opened by shortly invoking the Divine presence, uniting together in praise,

reading the scriptures, and prayer. And that every thing may be done decently and in order, it is proper that the person opening the society act as its president for that meeting.

VIII. That the members may speak to mutual edification, it is necessary that the *subject of conversation* be proposed at the preceding meeting in the form of a question, founded on some passage of scripture. Members should be called by rotation, to propose the subject of conversation. And it is the duty of members to ponder the subject by themselves, that they may be ready to speak to the edification of their brethren; and be prepared also to hear, to discriminate, and to receive, what may be spoken by others.

IX. Subjects should be selected for conversation to promote godly edifying; not to indulge curiosity or strife. And subjects should be taken up in pleasing variety and rotation. The doctrines of the cross,—the privileges of the covenant of grace,—the internal spiritual exercises of the saints,—the holy duties of christianity,—the institutions and order of the Christian church,—the spiritual design of these institutions,—the word of the Redeemer's patience,—the dispensations of Divine Providence towards the members, in the church, and in the world, should, in instructive variety, be brought under review in the conference of the Christian brethren.

X. In conversing upon the subjects appointed for discussion, members should not indulge in curious and unedifying speculations. Polemical disputations, and discussions purely political,

should be avoided. Members should seek after spiritual-mindedness, and endeavour to maintain a devotional spirit; remembering that they are gathered together in the name of Christ, and that they ought to be soliciting his gracious presence, and marking the tokens of it. They must not forget that they are specially before the Lord, in the acts of religious worship.

XI. After the discussion of the question, and the appointment of another for the ensuing meeting of society, the next person in rotation should be called to engage in the devotional duties, singing praise, reading a portion of the scripture, praying, and *concluding* the society with praise. At the conclusion of the devotional duties, it might not be improper that the person acting as president ask at the members in rotation, a question of the Shorter Catechism; beginning, each night, where it had been left at the preceeding. Without occupying much time, this practice might be useful in preserving on the memory of the members, particularly the younger members, this excellent summary of our most holy faith.

XII. In conducting all the parts of the social exercises, regard must be paid to *time* and *proportion*. The devotional exercises should in general be short, but not careless or formal. The observations made on the topic of conversation should be brief and pertinent. Observations already made by members should not be repeated by others. Individuals ought not, by tedious discourse, to occupy the time of others. The whole services ought to be conducted so as not to produce weariness.

ness. In the ordinary weekly meetings, a space of two hours, or a little upwards, if occasion require, may be reckoned a competent time.

XIII. In these societies some attention is also due to *manner*. The scriptures should be read with distinctness and becoming solemnity; praises should be sung with grave sweet melody; and the name of God invoked with holy reverence, and in ordinary circumstances, from the convenient opportunity for it, it is proper that in prayer the members bow down, "kneeling before the Lord their Maker." In conversation the members should study to be audible and grave.

XIV. In conducting the business of the society, attention should also be paid to the *Christian spirit* in which all things are to be done. Members must study to conduct themselves in humility and love. No one is to love the preeminence, by assuming a haughty air, or overbearing conduct among the brethren. Members should meet in the spirit of mutual subjection, honouring one another, and preferring others to themselves.—They ought not to indulge in remarks that indicate a slighting of others. The judged weakness and irrelevancy of observations should not be objects of animadversion. Members are not to indulge in personal allusions, or in rancorous or resentful language. In cases where incorrect ideas appear to be entertained, or where offensive expressions frequently occur in religious duties, private means should be used, in prudence, for their correction. When any subject offers to kindle animosity, it will, in general, be better to

waive the discussion for a time, because the beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water. In no case are members to seek triumph over one another, but edifying in holy love.

XV. When members have any important *intelligence* comporting with the nature of the society, it may be proper to embrace an opportunity of communicating it, either after the discussion of the question, or at the conclusion of the devotional exercises. The death of a Christian friend, the ordination or the death of a minister, impressive dispensations of providence, interesting intelligence connected with the particular church of their connexion, or respecting the kingdom of Christ in the world, are proper subjects of notice in society. Things ought not to be reported in society, without some authority for their credibility or truth. The statements ought to be short. And members are to beware of entering upon desultory conversation, so as either to encroach upon the time of the devotional duties, or unseasonably to protract the time of the society's meeting, or to counteract the savoury impression of the preceding exercises. Worldly and vain conversation, ever ready, from the natural tendency of the human heart, to insinuate itself, must not be indulged.

XVI. Regard must be paid by all the members to *punctuality* and *regular attendance*. In general, the services should commence at the hour appointed, there being two or three present; the member present, who is first on the roll, opening the society. Persons who are late owe an

explanation to their brethren. Persons indulging in a habit of negligence in the matter of punctuality should be admonished to amendment. Members who are necessarily absent, should, when it is in their power, send notice; and on their return, should acknowledge their brethren, by giving some explanation. Members who are two or three nights absent, and have not sent any notice of the reason, should be waited upon without delay, by appointment of the society. In case of individuals continuing incorrigibly irregular, it may be proper to request the aid of the office bearers of the church to recal them to order and to duty, to prevent, if possible, their exclusion from society.

XVII. Members are under particular obligations to *avoid giving offence* to their brethren. Offences between individuals should, if possible, be adjusted by the parties themselves, or by the mediation of a member or members. Scandals that are public, are, of course, reported to the rulers of the church; and the individuals concerned excluded society, or retained as hearers, as the honour of religion, or the edification of the members, may require. It is always to be remembered that the society has no judicial authority, and that censure and restoration to church-fellowship belong to the ordained representatives in ecclesiastical rule. Brethren, in cases of offence, are not to hate their brother in their heart, but to rebuke their brother, and not to suffer sin upon him; and upon evidence of penitence and regular restoration to the fellowship of the church, they should

discover a readiness to receive fallen brethren in the spirit of the precept: 'Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye that are spiritual restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.'

XVIII. Persons *seeking admission* into these societies should propose themselves through the medium of some of the members. The fact of their church membership should be ascertained. Societies should manifest a readiness to receive members who apply for admission; and at the same time, are to act with discretion, and due regard to edification. In the ordinary circumstances of a regularly organized church, it is not necessary to require of candidates a formal profession of their faith, when they have been otherwise regularly admitted to the church. But persons admitted as members should express their sense of the obligation and spirit of such associations, and their acquiescence in the regulations.

XIX. In cases where there is not access to the public ordinances of religion on the *Sabbath*, the members of society should assemble themselves together. And as, on such occasions, a greater proportion of time is to be devoted to the private social worship of God, the devotional exercises may be more frequently repeated than on the weekly meetings. Besides the reading of the Scriptures, and conversation, the reading of the subordinate church standards, or of other approved writings, may be resorted to for mutual edification.

XX. Besides the observation of these social duties in their ordinary seasons, there may be occurrences in Providence, and emergencies in the church, on which societies are called to meet and engage *occasionally* in religious duties, in relation to some particular object. In the view of specially difficult duties, there may be a call to special prayer; and on occasions of particular provocations, or of impending judgments, there may be seasons of special humiliation. At other times, there may be a call to special social thanksgiving.

XXI. As the members of society meet in brotherly love and confidence, and are expected to conduct themselves with prudent Christian freedom, it must be understood that the business and occurrences of the society are *not reported abroad* to the hurt of any member, or to the prejudice of the confidence and edification of the society.

XXII. Members of society should feel themselves under obligation to take *special interest in their brethren*. In cases of bodily suffering, or of temporal distress, or mental affliction, brethren should visit one another, and express their sympathy; and in cases of temporal straits, they should, as far as in their power, devise and extend means of relief.

XXIII. To promote the more extended fellowship of the brethren, and the good of the whole, it is advisable, where several societies exist in a congregation, to institute a regular *corresponding association*, composed of delegates from all the societies, to meet at stated times, for religious fel-

lowship, and for communication with one another. These associations will bring brethren, otherwise comparatively unknown to one another, occasionally together; they will diffuse information, and excite and strengthen a feeling of common interest in the Christian community; and they will tend to consolidate the union of all.

XXIV. It being impossible, in the nature of things, that rules can embrace every particular, something must be left to Christian *discretion and prudence*, to order, as circumstances admit and edification requires. Positive specifications are made in subserviency to the great spiritual object. Societies must order these as they see cause. The above are the general principles, and the most ordinary specifications. It will be found, in general, that orderly adherence to good rules will serve much to promote the object of these societies, and will contribute to form a valuable habit, to be carried into all the other branches of religious duty, and even into the concerns of the present life.

IV.

GENERAL DIRECTIONS & CAUTIONS.

Besides the regulations now submitted, or any others, Christian prudence must suggest many things that will contribute to the orderly and profitable observation of the duties of private Chris-

tian fellowship. The following things are subjoined, not in the form of rules, but as monitory hints, that may prevent failures in this duty, and promote general edification and comfort. They have been in part anticipated in the rules; but they merit, from their great importance, a more prominent place than could, with propriety, be assigned them in the digest of regulations. They respect rather the principles, than the order and form of the duty.

1. *Endeavor to cherish the spirit of the duty.*

The duties of private Christian fellowship require a spirit of true *religion and devotion*. Without this they can neither yield advantage nor comfort. Christians must seek to have Divine truth deeply impressed on their hearts, and to have habitually realizing views of the mediation of Christ, the influences of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of a gracious God. These glorious realities must be before their minds, and all that they do in these duties, they must do in the name of Christ, and with dependence on his grace. By cherishing the sentiments of true devotional religion, they will delight in the Lord, and in the duties in which his name is recorded. This will excite desire after the duty, prepare for the performance of it, and enable the mind to rise above the merely natural love of society, the pleasures of speculation, and the natural sympathies of a devotional feeling—things that may be attained without the exercise of true religion.

True devotional feeling can only be attained by faith in Christ, by an habitual looking unto him, and dependence on his grace. The persons engaging in the duties of which we speak, should be those who set the Lord before them, who dedicate themselves unto him, and are walking before him in the land of the living. The gracious presence of Christ alone can render these associations truly profitable and pleasant. Without this they cannot be mutually useful; for empty vessels cannot fill one another.

Christian brethren should meet in these societies in a spirit of *love unfeigned*. Love is the end of the commandment, the fulfilling of the law and of the Gospel. It is the grand comprehensive principle of pure religion. The love of Christ Jesus, and of those that are his, will counteract those evil principles which alienate and distract society, and give strength to all those gracious principles which unite and endear it. In these associations there is scope for this affection. Christians edify one another in love. Every thing inconsistent with this should be watched against, fresh unctions of the Holy Spirit implored, and every means of strengthening love in the soul improved. As hatred and strife are destructive of the end of these associations, and often dissolve them, so coldness of love is incompatible with their spirit. Love, pure and fervent, is the soul of these duties. This hallowed flame must be kept alive, by nearness to the Savior, and by the communion of saints. Happy are they who are taught of God to love one ano-

ther! 'Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and given himself for us. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.'

The duties of Christian fellowship must be performed in a spirit of *humility*. Humility is the glory of the Christian. In nothing is this Divine grace more necessary, than in the intercourse of religious fellowship. Christians must put on humbleness of mind. In these duties the precept is particularly applicable, 'Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem other better than themselves.' In these associations members must feel as equals, and even as inferiors. They must be subject to one another. When gifts, experience, and years impart superiority to individuals, they must not act upon this superiority. In the great diversities of gifts and of spiritual attainment, it is so ordered, that one individual does not excel in all endowments. In some point, the most eminent will find himself inferior to others. And gracious attainment will ever hide pride from man. The questions of the Apostle, and the conclusion derived from them, should never be forgotten: 'Who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou hast not received? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?' A lowly spirit should be imbibed; by habitually contemplating the Divine Majesty, the grace of God, the example of Christ, his holy precepts, and the excellencies of the saints. This lowly spirit will

regulate temper, and prevent offence from being given, and from being taken; it will prepare the mind for receiving instruction from others; it will give facility to intercourse, excite affection among the members, and invite the gracious presence of him who is meek and lowly, who resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

The duties of which we are speaking require also a spirit of *Christian diligence*. True religion in the human soul is a living principle, and it is always of an active nature. The hand of the diligent, even in spiritual things, will make rich. The slothful Christian cannot prosper in any religious duty. Indolence of spirit is most unfavorable to the Christian duties under consideration. Individuals who do not exercise their minds in inquiry, must feel little interest in society; and they will come to it ill prepared either to impart, or to receive, instruction and edification. Such a spirit will show its effects in all the other duties of religion, and must be prejudicial to the interests of the soul. It will grow in the soul, and may produce an alarming apathy, that is like the sleep of death. The Christian brethren must give themselves to meditation, reading, and prayer. These associations are special means of mutual quickening to Christians; but the improvement and the pleasure to be derived from them, will be intimately connected with their holy diligence.

When there is a spirit of diligence, it will prompt to *regular* and *punctual* attendance. When the mind yields to an indolent spirit, a lit-

the obstacle will detain at home. Through the deceitfulness of the heart, the mind, falling under the power of indolence, will seek excuses to itself; and the evil will acquire strength, to the great prejudice of the individual, and the discouragement of others. Inattention to punctuality disturbs or deranges the services of society, and protracts its meetings unseasonably. Through negligence, individuals contract habits of this kind. The spirit of regular and punctual attendance cannot be too much inculcated, as subservient to the great purposes of these societies; and, indeed, of all other religious duties. We have regularity exemplified in Christ, when it is said of him, *'and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day;'* and we have also an example of punctuality, when it is said, *'And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve disciples with him.'*

2. *Study to avoid the evils incident to these associations.*

While Christians, as every man hath received the gift, minister the same to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God, they *must not rest in the mere exercise and display of gifts.* There may be knowledge, and reasoning, and utterance, to produce self-gratulation and the applause of others, and, it may be, even sometimes to promote edification; while at the same time, there is no true principle of religion. Gifts puff up, and often produce envying and

strife; charity edifieth. Gifts are to be loved and admired, chiefly, as they are exercised with grace, to the Divine glory and edifying of the soul. 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, and a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.' The nature of the religious duties of which we now speak, affords special opportunity for the exercise of spiritual gifts; and they are, from this circumstance, attended with peculiar temptation.

Avoid, as much as possible, *theological controversies*. Brethren in these societies are agreed in the great principles of the Christian faith, and they meet to confirm and edify one another. They employ their minds in the exercise of sound judgment and reasoning; but these societies are not instituted for disputation. Brethren meet for spiritual edification, not for argumentative conviction in the truth. Polemical disputations on difficult points, are often unfruitful of good; in some cases, they rather unsettle than confirm faith, and tend more to alienate than unite the heart. It may be seasonable and necessary to review, occasionally, the arguments for the great cardinal doctrines; but not in the way of disputation. All things must be done in these societies to promote the exercise of gracious affections, and of devotion: to edify in the truth and in love.

The religious societies, of which we are speaking, should not indulge *speculations and discussions purely political*. Enlightened Christian views of the providence of God, in the affairs of the nations, in their subserviency to the interests of the kingdom of Christ, comport with the nature of these associations. But they must not exclude the concerns of personal religion, nor engross the attention. Conversation on these subjects, must be conducted with great Christian temper and prudence, and the word of God must ever be before the mind. If not watched, conversation on these subjects will degenerate into the jargon of party disputes and secular politics—things unbecoming these associations, unprofitable to the soul, and unacceptable to God. Even in communicating on the public affairs of the church, which may necessarily on some occasions come before them, Christians must watch against a spirit of debate and mere worldly contention.

Brethren must avoid *conduct that is overbearing*. In almost every society, however select and circumscribed, tendencies of this kind appear. There are individuals of a high and dogmatical spirit, who are ready to act as if their word should dictate in every thing. Such persons alienate the hearts of members from one another, rend societies in pieces, and destroy much good. Members should study to govern their own spirits, and beware of gratifying their own tempers. They should remember the religious design of these societies, and the constitutional equality of

members. When individuals, by their mental endowments, or otherwise, have it in their power to promote the good of a society, they need much grace and prudence, to act without arrogating to themselves superiority. In this way, if to do good is their object, they will have it in their power to be more useful than otherwise. Brethren should conduct themselves in the spirit of mutual subjection, they must respect the judgment of others, they must deal even tenderly with their prejudices, and forbear one another in love.

Personal offence and resentment ought to have no place in the Christian associations of which we speak. On the one hand, every thing should be done by tenderness of speech, and respectful and kindly conduct, to avoid giving offence to individuals: on the other hand, persons should be careful not rashly and unnecessarily to take offence, or to magnify it when it may be given. Much might in this way be done to prevent, and to mitigate offences. Every thing like personality should be excluded. When personal resentments dictate the selection of passages, or infuse themselves into the devotional exercises, persons give indications of the presence of a strange fire, of which they would do well to take heed that they be not consumed. Such fire cannot be accepted at the altar of God. Beware, then, of all offences. In their origin they are often trifling; but in their consequences momentous and fatal. The first beginnings of them should be watched, and, as far as possible, repressed.

In treating with offending brethren, avoid the *appearance of judicial procedure*. Offences must needs be. And there is a propriety that brethren be satisfied of the penitence and reformation of those who have offended, before receiving them into the fellowship of society. But the society must not assume the exercise of discipline, nor adopt the form of ecclesiastical courts. Discipline and restoration to church fellowship belong to the official representatives in rule, and should be left with them. To assume even the formality of these things, is inconsistent with the nature and just power of these societies, and must sometimes operate injuriously on the individuals concerned. In cases requiring it, there should be a friendly correspondence between the elders of the church, and the members of society. Yet societies should conduct themselves in terms of familiarity and love. And in no case are these religious societies to act, as if vested with judicial authority—a thing eversive of the order of the church, and calculated to mar the successful operations of ecclesiastical rule. Nor can they interfere with the orderly jurisdiction of the thrones of judgment in the house of David, otherwise than as church members, observing the regular order. It is always desirable that there be no jealousies, on the subject of prerogative, between these societies and the church courts, and that they be united in friendship, and prosecute their objects in their own spheres; and where there are just views of ecclesiastical order, and Christian principles prevail, there will be no improper

interference, but a pleasing and useful co-operation.

3. *Do not indulge unjustifiable excuses.*

Supposed deficiency of gifts, and unfitness for edifying others, form a plausible excuse. Let not a false delicacy hinder from attending upon a duty, in which it is accepted according to what a man hath, and not according to what he hath not. Gifts are improved by exercise. Often have persons, entering upon these duties with an amiable diffidence, become eminent in their Christian improvement, and usefulness. Beware of yielding to a sinful pride or shame, in the neglect of this duty. Such is the distribution of spiritual endowments, that there is scarcely an individual Christian, who may not, in some respect, be profitable to others. Even *one talent* is not to be 'kept laid up in a napkin.'

Is your time so circumscribed that there is difficulty in giving attendance? Employ holy wisdom in redeeming time for this duty, when it is in your power. Beware of an undue pursuit of this world. Do not indulge in unnecessary company-keeping and recreation, to the neglect of this duty. Remember whose your time is, and that it is the threshold of eternity. Manifest your willing mind, by sacrificing convenience, and even some temporal gain, to wait on the Lord; calculating your prosperity, not by the pecuniary amount, but by the blessing that maketh rich. Do not squander time, without regret, on inferior

objects, and complain of what is required for religious duties. It is comparatively a small proportion of time that is devoted to this duty; and, in general, with care it may be reserved for it, without prejudice to worldly interest. Particular exceptions will speak for themselves.

Let not offences with brethren hinder the performance of this important duty. Offences must needs be, in this state of imperfection. They are painful; but they afford a trial to faith and Christian principle, and give scope for the exercise of various grace. Early attention to the rules given in the precepts of the Saviour, under the Divine blessing, will be productive of the most happy effects. Christians should examine whether they have not aggravated offence, in the manner and spirit in which it has been taken. Offences ought not to be permitted to lie and rankle in the heart. The longer they remain, they strike their roots deeper; become more productive of noxious fruit, and are of more difficult eradication. Christians must not gratify humor and caprice, by acting a part towards brethren, of which they sullenly refuse to give account. 'Confess your faults one to another, and forgive one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you.'

Do you not experience the edification from these duties which you desire? Are the gifts of others not adapted to your improvement? In such a case it is proper to examine into the reason. It may be the more easy, but it is not the more safe way, to ascribe the cause to others. There

may be some reason of this state of things lurking within ourselves. We are not to despise others, whom we may think not gifted to our edification. Individuals of more limited endowments, will be found sometime excelling in the graces of the Christian character, and contributing not a little, by their example and spirit, to the improvement of others, in some respects more eminently gifted. We must not be rash to say of any member of Christ Jesus, 'I have no need of thee.' And we are not to confine our views of edification to the increase of knowledge, but extend them to the growth of faith, and hope, and love, and blessed Christian experience.

The frequent enjoyment of public ordinances, is no just excuse for the omission of more private religious duties. The religious duties of the family do not supersede those of the closet; nor do the duties of the public assembly supersede those of a more private nature. The obligation of the duty of *private religious fellowship*, does not rest upon its being a substitute for public ordinances; and of course the objection, not affecting the argument, loses its weight. These associations are vindicated, upon the principle of their being warranted Christian associations, supported by the principles, precepts, promises, and examples of scripture, and eminently auxiliary both to the secret and public duties of religion. The Christian finds all the various duties of religion needed in their place, to promote his spiritual interests; and he will not forsake private fellowship, upon the principle of its being superseded

by that which is more public, or of his having no need of such an auxiliary.

Let Christians beware, lest, under these or similar excuses, they yield to the native indolence and aversion of the mind in matters of religion, or to principles that cannot be brought forward in their own name, in extenuation of so great an omission.

4. *Persevere in these duties.*

Just views of the nature and importance of an object will direct and animate in the pursuit of it, and will serve to keep alive and renew the spirit, when it becomes languid, and is ready to die. In nothing is this more true than in the case of religious duties. From the principles of our nature, there is a proneness to relax in our attention to these duties; it is necessary, therefore, that we appreciate their grand design, and keep their object continually before us. The duties of private Christian fellowship are connected with all the good that religion presents to man; and their object is not fully obtained, till the soul has entered into heaven. This object never loses its certainty, or its magnitude. It stands connected with God, with the soul, with the church of Christ, and with eternity. And as the soul is more valuable than the body, and heaven is better than earth, and eternity transcends time, so do these duties rise above all secular concerns that may interfere with the performance of them. Do not faint, then, and become weary in your minds.

Watch against every tendency in the mind toward indifference about these duties, and let every thing producing this be feared. Many appear to begin to run well in these duties, and, yielding to internal indolence, gradually relax in their diligence, and insensibly fall away. Often has a decline from the regular performance of these duties, and the neglect of them altogether, been followed with remissness in the other duties of the spiritual life : and these things, working together, have frequently issued in a settled indifference to religion altogether; and, sometimes, in an avowed apostacy from its profession, if not in an open outrage of its morality. Such examples should produce a holy jealousy of ourselves. ‘Let us, therefore, fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.’ Under this salutary fear let us set a particular watch over these duties which bear most immediately on the religion of the heart. Let the Christian maintain a faithful inspection over the heart, and over the duties which give scope to its religious exercises. Among these, the societies of which we have been speaking hold an important place. ‘Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called, To-day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.’ The Christian’s perseverance is connected, in the way of means, with his holy diligence. ‘Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the

same example of unbelief.' 'He that endureth to the end shall be saved.'

CONCLUSION.

Dear Christian Brethren,

WE have shortly exhibited the obligations and advantages of private Christian fellowship, and we have submitted to you some suggestions for carrying it into practical effect. The great object we have in all this, is, that you may exemplify the duty in your practice, and that God may be glorified, by Christ Jesus, in your eternal salvation, and in the prosperity of his church. Suffer now the word of exhortation, and of remembrance.

We know no greater argument, by which to urge these duties on your practice, than the will of Jesus Christ our Lord, both yours and ours. We assume no dominion over your faith, but we would be helpers of your joy, and remembrancers of your duty. You cannot refuse that the duties in question are dictated by the law of nature, which is always assumed to be obligatory in revealed religion. You do not doubt that it is the will of Christ that his disciples familiarly associate with one another, and that private Christian fellowship is dictated by the very spirit of the Gospel, is implied in the endearing relations of the saints, and that it pertains to the liberty wherewith

Christians are made free. Read, we pray you, the many precepts of Christ on the duties of the saints to ONE ANOTHER* and ask yourselves, if no part of the will of Christ is left undone, when private Christian fellowship is omitted. Do you not approve these duties in your judgment? You cannot view the saints of God who have exemplified them, as violating the will of Christ. Are not these duties honoring to the Saviour, and commendatory of his religion? If you culpably neglect them, you are reprov'd by persons who serve other masters, and who show themselves to be in earnest, by the company with which they associate.

But, dear Christian friends, the will of your gracious Lord is your best interest. None can be so faithful to your every interest as He who loved you, and gave himself for you. We urge the duty from its subserviency to your own good. As you value religious knowledge, and the experience of its power in your hearts; as you value your own souls, and intercourse with heaven, we beseech you not to forsake the familiar society of the saints. Do not your necessary temporal cares, and your intercourse with the world, and the habitual observation of iniquity, tend to diminish the impressions of religion in the soul, to abate your sensible abhorrence of sin, and injure the spirituality of your mind? Know your danger. Seek the fellowship of God, and the society of his children, that ye may keep yourselves unspotted

*See passages quoted pages 9, and many others.

from the world. Private social religion will enliven your retirement, and counsel and encourage you in domestic society ; it will promote your improvement by the public institutions, and be a shield to you in the hour of temptation, and a solace in the day of trouble. Forsake not, then, your own mercy, by neglecting so precious a privilege.

And may we not also urge these holy Christian duties, from the pleasure that attends them ? There is a joy in religion with which a stranger does not intermeddle. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace. And the social nature of true religion prompts the soul to communicate its satisfactions, and to say, ' Rejoice with me.' Are you alive to the pleasures of friendship ? The sacred friendships which centre in Christ are peculiarly sweet ; and the sympathies which flow from him, and circulate among the members of his body, are powerful and gracious. Do you experience no pleasure in familiar religious intercourse with the saints ? Have you no inclination after it, no rebuke in your conscience for the neglect of it, nor for the manner in which the time is occupied, which might be appropriated to this object ? Do the pursuits of this life, the society of the world, and the recreations of men, afford you greater satisfaction ? There is, certainly, reason of apprehension in such a state of feeling. We exhort you, therefore, by the special pleasure, as well as by the profit, of private Christian fellowship, by the consolation that is in Christ, and the comfort in love, that ye consi-

der one another, to provoke unto love, and to good works.

Permit us also, dear Brethren, to put you in remembrance of your special obligations. Your privileges are great. You have the word of God, the ministrations of the Gospel, and still some measure of external peace. Many of you have stated access to public ordinances. The obligation of gratitude lies upon you, and you should unite to quicken the sentiment in one another, and to cherish the fruits of it, in increased attention to all the duties of religion. To act otherwise, is to manifest aggravated ingratitude. Besides, has not waiting upon these private institutions of religious worship, when accessible, been reckoned one of the duties connected with our ecclesiastical union, and implied, if not expressed, in admission to the communion of the church, as one of the duties of the brotherly covenant? Not a few of you have acknowledged this obligation, with your babes in your arms, before the Lord. The vows of the Lord are upon you, and to him shall the vow be performed. Consider, we entreat you, the intrinsic obligation of the duty itself, the special obligations of love and gratitude, and your own voluntary obligations to walk in this branch of the fellowship of the Gospel.

In this matter you are also compassed with a great cloud of witnesses. You have the footsteps of the flock in all ages, as they passed to the heavenly fold. The societies of which we now speak, were, in early times, the nurseries of the church of Christ. In this way, a little one

became a thousand, and a small one a strong nation. Flourishing churches have originated in two or three persons, uniting together in prayer. Often have the prayers of a few who had no access to the public institutions, been heard and answered in 'giving to Jerusalem one that bringeth good tidings,' as in the case of the extraordinary mission of Paul to Macedonia*. These duties were exemplified in those periods of the church, of which we cherish a grateful remembrance. Many of the saints, in their dying moments, have attested to the blessed satisfactions and refreshments of spirit, which they have enjoyed in society with their brethren; and instances of this kind still occur. Our ancestors, in times of great public trouble, exemplified this duty, and were by these means nourished in faith, animated with steadfastness and zeal in the public cause of Christ and prepared for heaven. Some, even on the scaffold, have spoken with feelings of the most lively interest, when bidding 'sweet societies,' with all other things beneath the skies, a last adieu.

We may also remind you that the general observations now made, have been particularly verified in the church to which you belong. For a long time it existed only, and was cherished, in praying societies. In the want of public ordinances, these societies were the chief means of holy fellowship. 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down; yea, we wept when we remember-

*Acts xvi. 9—13.

ed Zion.' Nor were our fathers forsaken of the Lord their God. He caused their eyes to 'behold their teachers.' And after the preaching of the Gospel was enjoyed, it was for a long time, in so occasional a manner, that these societies were still the chief nurseries of the church. By bringing forward the rising generation, and receiving the accession of those who considered it their duty to unite with them, the church gradually increased; and it now exhibits a regular ecclesiastical organization in Scotland, in Ireland, and in America. Regular access to the public ordinances, in many cases, now supersedes the necessity of your meeting in these societies, on the Sabbath; but these associations on other occasions are equally expedient and obligatory. Let those who are still occupying sequestered places, not forsake the assembling of themselves together, on the Holy Sabbath, and other seasons; and let them pray and hope, and wait on that God who can bring light out of darkness, and make their latter end greatly to increase. And let it also be remembered that these societies are not only necessary to nourish a church, in an incipient state, when the members are few and the public ordinances rare, but are needed to promote its unity and spiritual prosperity, when by increase of numbers and appointment of office-bearers, it may be regularly organized, and enjoy the stated administration of public ordinances. Let brethren provoke one another, by love and good works, to exemplify this duty. Let the elders that rule, and that labor in word and doctrine, manifest a care to have

these societies organized, where there is opportunity, and encourage them by their counsels, and prayers, and presence. Regular attendance on these societies, will greatly encourage the ministers of the Gospel in their work, and will tend greatly to unite in truth and love, the members among themselves. Remember then, Christian brethren, the example of those who have gone before you. This duty, sacred from the will of Christ, has special obligation and encouragement from the holy practice of those who, through faith and patience, are now inheriting the promises.

And let the aspects of the times animate you to draw near to one another in the duties of holy Christian love. The world at large is agitated, the kingdoms move, the times are eventful. A long expected era of uncommon interest approaches, and appears to be drawing nigh. Important excitements have been imparted to the Christian community, and the enemy is still coming in like a flood. Signs, of strangely opposite aspect, appear to indicate an approaching conflict. While you reverentially regard the work of the Lord, and consider the operations of his hand, and are waiting for Zion's deliverance and enlargement, you stand in need of mutual counsel and confirmation. You have espoused a profession of Christ, and necessity has been laid upon you, however unpleasant in the occasion of it, to assume a distinct ecclesiastical standing. An ostentatious singularity, we trust, has not dictated your conduct; nor does a pharasaical pride, or a

spurious zeal, actuate your spirit. You seek, we hope, to be guided by enlightened views of duty, and to be actuated by a conscientious sense of obligation. The object contemplated by the fathers of the Reformation retains its importance, and the duty of witnessing for truth is still necessary and obligatory. 'We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor. BUT NOW WE SEE NOT YET ALL THINGS PUT UNDER HIM. Ere this be accomplished, every thing that letteth must be taken out of the way. 'By terrible things in righteousness wilt thou answer us, O God of our salvation; who art the confidence of all the ends of the earth, and of them that are afar off upon the sea.' The Lord hath founded Zion, and the poor of his people shall trust in it, till he establish and make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. The Christian's faith may be subjected to special trial, and his duty may be difficult to learn, and to perform. There are dangers on the right hand and on the left; the christian needs counsel to discern time and judgment, and he is required to be full of eyes before and behind. As a means, then, of an enlightened steadfastness and holy zeal, let Christians take counsel together. In a peculiarly evil time, it is said, with instructive emphasis, 'THEN they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.' In the holy fear of God's righteous judgments, and in the certain expectation of glorious deliverances on mount Zion, let the saints, in present times, familiarly communicate with one

another, for their mutual preparation to meet the Lord their God.

Let us put you also in remembrance of the Almighty aid, in strength of which you are to perform the holy duties which we so plainly and so earnestly urge. While we call you to obey the Saviour's law, we exhort you to improve the Saviour's grace. We beseech you to receive Christ Jesus the Lord, and to walk in him. Always relying on his righteousness for acceptance with God, study his precepts that you may know the matter of your duty, and depend on the grace of the Holy Spirit, in all your attempts to perform it. Apply this essential Christian principle to the duties in question, and you will find them profitable and pleasant.

And, finally, brethren, forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, but exhort one another, for THE DAY IS APPROACHING. We desire to watch for your souls as those that must give account, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. Your and our opportunities are passing away, and soon are we to appear before the judgment-seat of Christ. You are left behind of many fathers and brethren, whose testimony, and example, and death, have attested the excellency of the holy duties of which we have been putting you in remembrance. You are soon to follow them, and these duties under the Divine blessing, may eminently contribute to your preparation for the coming of the Lord. There is but a step between you and death. THE DAY OF THE LORD IS AT HAND.





